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Leadership Competency Series

Integrity – The Fabric of Leadership

LEADERSHIP COMPETENCY/ Integrity is a reflection of our personal, social and professional personalities. It is the essence of personal credibility of a leader. One of proven tool for sustaining organisational integrity and ethics, is to reason out, explain, define and strictly implement the consequences of breach of ethical codes, writes M R CHANDRAMOWLY.

In that morning, he had to pull out of his bed with effort. His mother had woken him up twice. It was getting late and he was not able to cope up with the timings of his morning routines. Uthkarsh, a senior manager, holding a key portfolio in a cash rich company was undergoing heavy stress. He was unable to decide on that proposal. What is required to do was very simple. By doing that, he would receive money. It is enough to live on life long luxury. What is expected from him? He was required to alter two numerical figures in four places of a financial document. The top leader in the hierarchy who had a final say about the veracity of the document contents was Mr Mehta, his boss. The proposal came from him. It was risk free. There was no way for any one to find out these changes. Uthkarsh was very sure about the overall safety of this proposed invisible "tampering". There was only one dilemma. It was the vexing question of what is right and wrong. He new that the alterations what he was asked to do and sign off is not based on facts. But this falsification had blessings from own boss and there was no risk in any angle. If he refused to do this, he would loose the money as well as his relationship with his boss and probably he may have to quit the job. He thoroughly thought about it on the previous night. He was not quite sure on what he must do or whom should he consult? Father was his best guide. He lost his father few years ago and he could not discuss this matter with any other person. His mother was illiterate and certainly would not understand these things. In reality, he had no better well-wishers other than her. Finally, he decided to talk to her. He explained to his mother about this proposal, his thoughts and the risk free chance of making a huge fortune. Mother listened to Uthkarsh with all concern and attention and said. "Dear son, I am unable to understand this problem of yours. You can do as you wish. But I can only tell you one thing. You come home late every day, and during the night, you sleep so well peacefully and I have to wake you up every day in the morning. You must not do any thing, which takes away your pleasant sleep and health. I just want you to be happy and worry less." Uthkarsh paused and said, "Mother, I got the answer. I do not need that money".

Balance of Head and Heart

Success and happiness are results of balancing. It is striking a balance between need and greed, hate and infatuation, inactivity and workaholic, starving and indigestion, bankruptcy and "billionaire-by-night". It is the art of life. In a weighing scale, the firm centre stud does the balancing. Balance means achieving equality among the soft and hard stuff, our choices of what we want and values of how we achieve that with a firm principle stud in between. Great leaders make a perfect balance of values and competencies. "Vision" in Einstein, "Inspiration" in Gandhi, "Direction" in Patton, "tolerance" of Japanese are all the competencies balanced with values.

Unethical behaviour

Why people fall into the trap of unethical behaviour, though they know the consequence well? Research points out the reasons as stress, confusion, pressure to perform at expected levels, internal and external competition and lack of knowledge. Before we do a thing, simply it takes few seconds for us to examine what we do is whether ethical and legal? Is it OK? Is it Right? The balance between the heart and head will show the way. Am I fair in doing this? Does it hut any one? Have I been honest with those affected? Can my conscience live with this decision? Such questioning brings us to a balanced state to make non-emotional decisions. A Japanese proverb goes to say "The reputation of a thousand years may be determined by the conduct of one hour."

The wholeness of Integrity

Integrity is that which is integrated, the wholeness in its completeness. "Integrity is the ability to walk your talk through integratedness of public, private and deep inner life, around a balanced set of principles." "Integrity is confirming reality to our words. It is about keeping up promises and fulfilling expectations." (Stephen Covey). How does integrity reflect in a situation of discussion? The important way to manifest integrity is to be loyal to those who are not present during a discussion. While you defend those who are absent, you retain the trust of those present. Fruit is the top end of result of an integrated system of a plant commencing from its root. "If one seeks to bear fruit, let him start at the root" says 'Guru Granth Sahib.

Power of consequences

In my reflection on learning human values, one predominant factor I considerer, as the basis for any operating value systems is "consequence". We are not free to do any thing what we feel like doing. The codes, constitutions, rules and restrictions impose taboos on certain behaviours that are appalling to society. In these areas, we have no choice but to follow the code of ethics. There are qualitative consequences for following or flouting the code of ethics. Positive consequences include appreciation, recognition or reward for certain behaviours, which are accepted by the mankind, universally. Values such as Truth, Love, Service, Empathy, and Happiness do not under go any change in different human cultures, in its basic roots. In an organisational context, practicing ethical codes becomes part of its culture.

Employees enjoy their ethical rights. But, one cannot expect to have the "rights" of human values without the "responsibilities" emanating from the value system and the rules of the game must be followed while "consequences" operate with positive or negative effect underpinning the choices. If I want others to speak truth and not lie to me, I can expect to have that right only when I display my responsibility being truthful to others. The same is true with organisations, teams and individuals. Customer focuses, personal credibility, continuous improvement, are some indisputable organisational values. The consequences of not practicing such values are severe for long time survival of organisations. We follow our value system not only for the love of it, but more essentially for the fear of consequence of flouting. If there is a perfect adherence to traffic rules and people display that as a value, it is the outcome of the habit turned in to a behaviour because of consequence in the background. In France, contravention of traffic laws would result in reduction of certain points to hold driving license. So, only an established and strictly practiced consequence as a built-in-process can only bring about the discipline. Then, it becomes a habit and finally a social value. Same is true about implementation of organisational values. Unless there are consequence and an unbiased system operating which ensures consequences of breach of codes; organisational values will remain as cosmetic words. In an American organisation where I worked, our management team was responsible to ensure that all the employees travelling by car essentially wear seat belts. It took almost two years for us get that embedded in the culture.

This is a value of safety, which was demonstrated in our action in specific cases. The necessity to wear a seat-belt is still insignificant in the minds of Indian employees and there by we made it as an employment condition. Though I am not working for that organisation today, it has become a habit of absolute unawareness; robotically I put on the seat belt while taking out the car from portico!

Consequences will bring out a discipline. Discipline becomes a habit, when you practice it seeing a value in it and it integrates with your behaviour. One of the proven tool to develop a value system for an organisation is to reason out, define ethical codes, and demonstrate by action, the consequences of breach of a code. It may appear as harsh virtue but I am yet to see any other alternative method.

There is "man" in 'management'. "MAN" again is integration of Man-Animal-Nature. The quality and proportion of M-A-N underpin our choices, emotions and actions. It is important to observe what is that which dominates our mind in a given situation. Is it the Man part, the maturity of making right choices, Animal part, the instinct of anger and fear or the Nature part, the down-hill flow of energy, the force of entropy -the law of thermodynamics.

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